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Students as Producers: An 'X' Disciplinary Client Based Approach to  
Collaborative Art, Design and Media Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a cross-disciplinary project between BA(Hons) Interior Design, Creative Multimedia and Film and Media Studies at a large Metropolitan University in the North of England. The collaboration was part of Unit X, a faculty wide credit bearing initiative to enable better collaboration across art and design courses.

The project explored cross-disciplinary approaches to problem solving and generating designed outputs using a 'vertical studio' model. The outcomes for the students were to create a number of media/arts/design based interventions, responding to real clients (festival organisers, local bar and café owners) and real client briefs. The constructivist approach to pedagogy allowed students the opportunity to develop their practice skills within communities of practice to help explore, develop, support and form their creative identities. The aim was to facilitate a supported environment to allow knowledge creation to take place

through group tasks, reflection and the challenges of working and negotiating roles as professionals.

Keywords: pedagogy, design, client, vertical studio, identity, collaboration

## 1. Introduction

After a successful rebrand in 2009 and a new £32 million Art School building, the centralisation of courses and shared spaces allowed for an increase in potential cross-faculty collaboration. Promoting the possibilities for new working methods became the focus of the school ethos, supported and administered through Unit X, a faculty wide module that nurtures collaboration and experimentation, not previously possible under single disciplinary course administration. The module places an emphasis on work place ethics and partners academic staff teams with external partners on projects that cross a range of disciplines, creating opportunities for students to work with other practices to enrich their learning experience and model the working practices of industry outside of the discourse of the Art School. In 2012 Unit X won the prestigious Sir Misha Black award for Innovation in Design Education. The award recognises the school's commitment to education that supports the creative economy of the region and the importance of design and art practice as global activity and its impact on lifestyle and culture.

Manchester is a creative hub in the North of England for media, broadcast and design industries. With a large economy supported by international recognition

as a leading digital city and supported by BBC and ITV investment in MediaCityUK at nearby Salford Quays. The growth of the local industry relies on producing regional talent with the necessary skills to contribute to developing a sustainable creative economy. The work of Unit X connects students with the city and its institutions, helping to foster and develop a direction for regional creative economies by developing teaching and learning strategies off campus, and on-site amongst regional businesses with stakeholders from across the community.

In March 2014 students and staff from BA(Hons) Creative Multimedia, Interior Design and Film and Media Studies designed a project structured in two phases in order to address two project briefs. The first brief was to produce work for an international Digital Media Arts Festival. The second was to reflect on the experience of the first project and develop creative responses to ‘real client’ briefs for an event in the city’s creative quarter for a city-wide event. Each of the two phase were three weeks long with a final installation outcome to be engaged with by festival visitors.

The work presented here offers an overview and evaluation of the collaboration, with a focus on the relationships within a vertical studio system, an approach tested on Unit X for the first time with this project. Our aim was to explore approaches to cross-disciplinary design study, but also differentiated experiences within subject disciplines and how students adapt to external working environments and negotiate team-working ethics through tutor and client relationships. The pedagogical approach to the project was modelled around a

constructivist paradigm: students build a public design installation, and learn through active participation in the group, with the tutor in the role of facilitator and mentor. Four tutor assigned 'artistic directors', all BA(Hons) Film and Media level six (third/ final year) students worked with a mixed group of ten level four (first year) students from BA(Hons) Interior Design and BA(Hons) Creative Multimedia. The significance in defining this singular role was for the third year students to take on the role of responsibility for both setting the working methods and ethics of the group, articulating ideas between the team and the client, as they would in a studio system. In no way where the level six students making claims that they

In the first part of this article we discuss our approach to working methods and developing the vertical studio in the work place, and how we tried to define the role of the tutor in order to establish new working conditions between tutor, students and place. In the following part of the paper we explore the second part of the project and developing creative identity through work with an outside client. At the end of the module and the assessment process we conducted interviews with a small selection of students from a range of groups and courses. Interviews and observations were transcribed and coded into a number of specific themes with a research focus on exploring working methods across year groups. The following text contains a number of quotes from interviews conducted with a small group of Unit X students following the project. Names have been changed in order to respect the identity of participants.

## 2. Learning to be Professional – The Teacher Relationship

Level four students from Interior Design and Creative Multimedia were allocated groups in which they were supported by a level six Film and Media Studies student, assigned the role of artistic director. The role was to give level six students some control in order to organise and identify a focus for their own practice, and give them experience in project managing/art direction within the context of two creative festivals. The peer support was designed to help less experienced students explore their creative identity early in their career, that once found would help to motivate students and achieve a sense of vocational pride (Jonasson, 2012). In the first part of the unit our aim was to establish both an individual and a collective creative identity. Our method to develop this was to:

Establish place

Establish the client

Establish the brief

Establish the vertical studio

Develop a tutor/facilitator relationship

In terms of our engagement as teachers, our choice of teaching and learning spaces were made in order to avoid any influence of an institutional discourse or any system of working representative of a student environment, eschewing the established norms of working on campus. We wanted them to guide each other and shape their own identity without the pressure to be a student, or meet the needs of the establishment. We wanted them to search for meaning and reflect on

their own identities through the process of professional engagement, and facilitate their own learning as a multi-skilled community, engaging in shared teaching practices across the three disciplines representative in each group. We took a constructivist approach and our role as tutors was to facilitate each group, helping them to find ways where they could adequately meet the needs of the creative challenge. Constructivism advocates student-centred discovery, learning where students use information they previously know to acquire more knowledge (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002). In order to establish the vertical studio we needed to establish an early working ethic. Space played an important part in both establishing an ethic and helping to develop a sense of identity, as we chose to conduct all meetings away from the campus and on the site of practice. By situating projects in a professional studio context, students learnt methods of structuring the creative brief through the collaborative vertical studio structure, allowing them to gain experience of real-life practice early on in their careers (Liem, 2014).

Students' creative identity is informed by discovering vocational pride and motivated by a sense of autonomy, supported by peers, collaborators and stakeholders engaging within real world design scenarios. In order for students to develop 'vocational pride' they first need to go through a process of learning through experiences defined as logical steps in their understanding. In the case of this study experiences necessary to elicit a process of engagement were tested across the art and design faculty, initiating communities of practice around a number of design issues and methods, where learning takes place as an 'interaction between experience and competence' (Wenger, 1998). Students

identified and integrated into the learning environment by position in the vertical studio system (across year groups and subjects) that allowed them to develop 'good behaviours' (Baron and Corbin, 2012) and emotional investment by exploring collaborative learning through sharing experiences and subject specific knowledge. Importantly what they learnt about their own knowledge through reflecting and teaching their colleagues skills, and sharing their creative experiences and skills. The tutor role in facilitating an environment of social recognition (Jonasson, 2012), connection to the institution and 'active citizenship' (Baron and Corbin, 2012) enables students to develop their 'well being' (Kahu, 2011) through feeling and becoming part of a community. Reflected in these communities the contemporary design agency/studio is dependent on developing creative content through fostering identities across a diverse range of art, design, and media specialists.

As students develop their understanding of their context through a process of first 'good' behaviours (conducive to learning, e.g. attendance and punctuality) they start to build an emotional link where they feel a need to be present or be part of their programme. As they start to engage in good behaviours and 'emotional' attachment they experience the next step of 'cognitive' engagement in which they find their 'vocational pride' (Jonasson, 2012) and develop identity, which becomes invested in what they do and how they do it. This is when the student becomes autonomous and rooted in their practice. The adaption to the environment is an important part of setting the tone of expected ethics within the vocation, as they identify themselves as professionals within the change of environment. Students start realising a transformation in their own sense of being



through a paradigm shift in their relationship with the creative world, changing intellect, inspiring imagination and sensibility (Findeli, 2001).

Yes, the difference of the situation, you are not in a classroom doing a brief for an assessment. You are actually working on a live project where you have to change things.

Mark, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

Establishing the relationship with the tutor was the first task, and would give meaning to our teaching and learning methods. The setting and spaces to do this were important. The search for identity takes place outside of the classroom setting and a different set of ethics, methods and relationships have to be negotiated in order to find meaning and meet the demands and challenges of the creative industries, requiring a maturity in thinking, personal responsibility and an independence of thought and action, mirroring the reality of practice (Barnes, 1993). The vertical studio model was chosen as part of the constructivist approach to shift the focus from an institutional hierarchical model to a cognitive self-determined social learning model through observation and imitation (Peterson and Tober, 2014) organised, managed and articulated by a peer working as artistic director. The connection with the tutor as facilitator/mentor changes the relationship and the students see it as 'more meaningful'. They see the establishment of a relationship as 'more specific' and better for their understanding as they are not 'just taking notes'.

Teaching was fluid, with no notes; lesson plans or fixed ideas of aims or outcomes. It also lacked any predetermined structure. On the surface this could seem as lack of organisation but was from a professional perspective a response to positivist approaches and the part of the project the students commented that they enjoyed the most, as teachers brought no preconceptions about what was expected or to be achieved. In the institution learning is rooted in practice, and skills are examined, labelled and prescribed through defined learning outcomes. Within the real world, learning isn't so explicit and takes place as an integral part of generative social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In situating learning our hands off approach may at first seem unstructured and without direction, but by over engaging in the practices of each group we would begin to define similar boundaries and outcomes as those of the institution. The vertical studio system offers a method to develop a structure that allows for social learning within the group. It has no centre and is not assessed, in this case the only condition of its structure is the role of the artistic director, but rather than other students working as apprentices, learning takes place through a shared social process that responds to the needs of the situation by learning through legitimate liminal participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), something that wouldn't be possible inside the institution. Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world, and our attempt was to allow students to learn as part of the lived-in world, not a synthesis of the institution. This is not a teaching approach or part of our pedagogical practice, but in our overall design, we needed to understand the opportunities for learning as a constituent of social practice, and part of our choice was to limit our engagement with practice as much as possible. As tutors our presence was not merely as facilitator, we were aware of our own identities

and these represented the institution, its discourse and practices. This was something out of our control as our engagement could be a limiting factor to learning through social practice and disrupt the groups. The challenge was getting the balance right, and the only way to do this was to physically move outside of the institution and its structure.

To talk about peripheral participation as a method of teaching is not possible, it is not an instructional method, we did not produce any outcome or try to predict what skills students would learn. We wanted their understanding to be part of and applied to the way they negotiate the social world, and this is very specific to each individual. Where it does help is for an understanding of how and where learning takes place, this allowed the students to be better learners and more capable of developing skills needed in real world.

Students enjoyed and respected the open dialogue, allowing them to take responsibility and develop their own learning as part of the group. The advice given by tutors was often either developed or in some cases discussed as a problem, as it shifted the groups thinking and directed their thoughts and ideas into a dichotomy about doing the right thing to develop their autonomous creative identity or keeping the tutor pleased and adhering to the discourse established between teacher and student as a reflection of the classroom environment. They recognise the dynamic 'away from the classroom' because 'you are doing an independent project'. The shift in decision-making, and the place of the classroom is the domain of the tutor, on campus the tutor maintains/asserts control; the student is working for the tutor and guided by

them. They relinquish control and therefore a loss of open creativity, once the project leaves the campus and 'away from the classroom', and becomes 'independent' the control is with the student and provides them with a 'much more enjoyable' experience, increasing the working ethic across the project.

I think the tutors aren't working off their own lesson plan and brief that is set when you walk into the classroom; because you are doing an independent project they just give their advice and feedback. I enjoyed it a lot more.

Mark, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

They work with challenges and situations and record how long they are doing it before they need advice. Rather than provide advice they seek it when they cannot find an answer. The facilitator's role is also identified as a mentor, someone with skills and experience who can offer expert technical advice. Not necessarily on site but someone they can turn to at any time when needed. The patterns in the data suggest there are often fixed amounts of time they experience a problem before they seek an external resolution.

If I had a problem, that I was working on for 20 minutes or more I would give him (tutor) a call and ask his advice. He would either help me then, or come over and give some advice

Phillip, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

The project allowed for a closer relationship with tutors, leading to a shared commitment and engaged learning experience of discovery, speculation and intellectual rigour (Sigurjonsson, 2014). Students understood the change in roles and were able to shift this into their own studio system and conceptions of professionalism, as the tutor became a consultant, as ‘what works’ for the student teams are tutors giving ‘leadership advice rather than a lecture’ (Peter, Unit X L6 Film and Media Student). As the relationship developed across the three weeks of the first part of the module, their feelings toward tutors changed as they learnt to be a professional and developed their own creative identity, through ‘interesting’ engagement with the process and better treatment with ‘more freedom, more equality’ and an ability to ‘respond better. (Peter, Unit X L6 Film and Media Student). The importance of the tutor and their contribution to the group became less important as students reach a point of independence where they can no longer facilitate the ideas of tutors and see their input as a distraction. They still rely on a mentor in a time of crisis, but in personal recognition and defining their place within a constructive work ethic they reach a deeper learning experience (Liem, 2010) where they no longer rely on the input from tutors, but reject it, and perhaps the system, as disruptive to their own working model. However, this changes from individual to individual.

In the second project, the contact with tutors didn’t help at all, because every time I came in you guys would give me a new idea or would change something, and I found that every time I came in I would re-write the programme to fit the new requirement.

Mark, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

The outcome of the first project enabled students to develop a sense of creative identity facilitated by the tutor as an introduction to working environments and establishing working ethics. Each group negotiated roles and, by the end of the project, each group had learnt to work autonomously, without the need of a tutor. In the second part of the project, the students developed their creative identities through forming relationships with clients.

### 3. Working as a Professional – The client relationship

The following project for a city-wide festival consisted of five individual public facing sites (bars and cafes) with one group per site. On each, students worked with a client and a pre-existing creative brief to develop a design installation. There was an overall project theme, but each client also had themes they wanted to explore in order to promote their establishment. As an example, one client wanted to celebrate 25 years of business and pay tribute to the customers, communities and cultures that had played a part in the history of the space. On site working relationships with the clients were established and the tutor took a more backseat approach. The focus was to develop creative identity as a design professional, working in a real world environment, with similar pressures and issues. The use of the vertical studio meant that they could quickly establish

order in the group and quickly develop a set of ethics suitable for the environment and working processes. The artistic directors 'established the tone' of the projects, rules and methods of working and communication with the client. The management of the group was central to success, but the style of management was reflected through the relationship with the client: 'The client was so nice and we got on with her so well' (Peter, Unit X L6 Film and Media Student). An easy working relationship and relaxed attitude would seem like a recipe for success, but the data repeatedly highlighted that the working ethic of each group quickly broke down when the client was relaxed, lacked a clear aim or allowed increased freedom. In terms of this ethic, even when it was established in the first project through a 'black and white' client brief.

There was a very clear end goal on the first project, this was clear and there would have been several things we could have cut that wouldn't have affected the project, because the goal was so clear it was a much easier project.

Phillip, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

The tone and the working practice established through the first project didn't extend to the second project and the client is the person responsible for setting the scene and establishing motivation. Peter (one of the L6 artistic directors) hard working in the first project, admits that he didn't do so well in the second due to his relaxed relationship with the client, which later led to him 'fighting time' and struggling to complete the project. He takes responsibility for the failings of the project, but a clear correlation is seen across all projects. The one exception is

where the client was 'picky' and proved more of a challenge to the group, to the way they worked and their ideas. Their increase in skills came through intense group negotiation and employing not only ideas that would please the client and adequately meet the specifics of the brief, but how to present ideas in a non-technical way that the client would understand and approve. The 'picky' client changes the motivation of the group and the group leader has to 'set the tone from day one'.

Our client was picky and he had an idea what he wanted, and he stuck with it. Our freedom was limited and we didn't have that much. All the things we could have made and the possibilities, this could have been against us, but this was more beneficial as he was a tough guy, we learnt how to deal with that and work within the limitations, overall this was a good thing.

John, Unit X L4 Creative Multimedia Student

In order to manage the challenge, other groups reflected on their success and blamed their own failings on the artistic director and the ability to set work ethics early and motivate the team, directly connecting to the relaxed attitude of the client 'leaving them to do whatever they wanted'. Even when the client was not on site, on day one they need to set the tone. It is important for the client in this case to know what they want and there must be clear aims and objectives for the student to follow in order to establish personal creativity and working ethics. The students were motivated by the client and the way the client behaved, whether they were on site or not influenced the motivation and the work ethic of the



students. In terms of the students learning and the development of their own creative identity, establishing working parameters and ethics through client relationships play an important role in the way they work and communicate as part of a team. Student confidence grew through the proposal and pitching stage when they felt they had the client 'on board'. This gave them the emphasis to focus on the work as they were going in 'the right direction'. It made the process easier as they understood their work responsibilities to the client and could switch from open-ended development to focused methods of production.

There was an expectation that the successful working methods from the first project would be maintained without the necessity to re-establish the tone in the second project: 'With the second project there was an expectation that everyone would do the work, or do a similar level of work' well' (Peter, Unit X L6 Film and Media Student). However, the second project, and the change in the client required a new order to be established. It is clear that the 'tone' needs to be set in relation to the client and from the start of each project. There were exceptions that work ethic and motivation would simply carry over from the first part of the module.

## Conclusion

In the first part of the project (Digital Media Arts Festival) the tone was fairly standardised and the quality and work ethics fairly consistent across the groups. The shared client was fairly challenging and this was a large prestigious event.

The client demanded certain things and this was the base to set the tone for each group and the expected work ethics for the project. They are working toward the event goal as outlined by the client and their ambition. In the second project (City-wide Festival) it is clear that the clients that were less challenging and did not set a clear outcome and failed to make students set the tone early in the task, ultimately failing in their ambition. This is clear with Peter across the two projects, his success in the first and his relative lack and own reflection of this in the second ‘They have high standards and it’s a prestigious event, I wanted to do well for it.’

Lessons were learnt from previous years and how to contextualise the disciplines students were studying so that they understood their relationship with a ‘creative practice’. That creativity is not necessarily encapsulated by a defined discipline’s name but more universal and design as a practice has many facets that are naturally interdisciplinary and shared. Interior design, CMM (Creative Multimedia) and FMS (Film and Media Studies) are subjects that are multifaceted and collaborative, all in which there is intrinsic value in collaborative practice.

The vertical studio model employed to structure the project allowed the students to develop autonomous communities of practice. By facilitating this model, staff and students mediate a territory of emotional engagement (Heyward, 2010) where students discover learning experiences and tutors mentor and support their realisations. The nature of the mixed disciplined and mixed cultural ‘creative studio’ enabled a diverse interdisciplinary and international dialogue around ways of working and ways of interpreting creativity, aesthetics, design and

professionalism. It shows that intercultural and interdisciplinary discourse is valuable in shaping and defining meaning and engagement with the project. This work based learning method to creative education has been an invaluable experiment in establishing new methods for teaching creative autonomy and as a contribution to knowledge demonstrates that although students learn to work autonomously it is not without the meticulous planning and facilitation of the academic team. Autonomy needs structure (Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens and Dochy, 2009), realisations need to be staged by the facilitators in order to be perceived through emotional engagement. Learning here is reflective of ‘real world’ professional scenarios, which is ultimately perceived as more meaningful and valuable by the student.

The opportunities presented by Unit X were designed for integrating students into new working relationships to explore practice in a number of different ways. However, this failed to identify the opportunities and the important contribution this makes to working methods of staff collaborating with colleagues for the first time. This development is an important contributing factor to teaching and learning as experience of design and approaches to pedagogy play equal roles in the development. The contribution the module made to teaching and learning was equally important for staff in understanding and extending methods of practice across the collaboration and their own subject area. On return to their own department methods were shared and therefore presented an important contribution to research and teaching practice. The outcomes of these approaches engaged staff in new working methods that opened conversations about teaching

practice and research to develop a breadth of multi disciplinary approaches to Art, Design and Media education.

### Notes

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